

Rice land for labour agreements benefiting women

The Lowlands Agricultural Development Programme (LADEP), Gambia

The Lowlands Agricultural Development Programme (LADEP) was the first eight-year phase of a 20-year programme for sustainable community-driven reclamation and development of lowland areas to improve traditional rice production, using simple technologies and self-help labour.

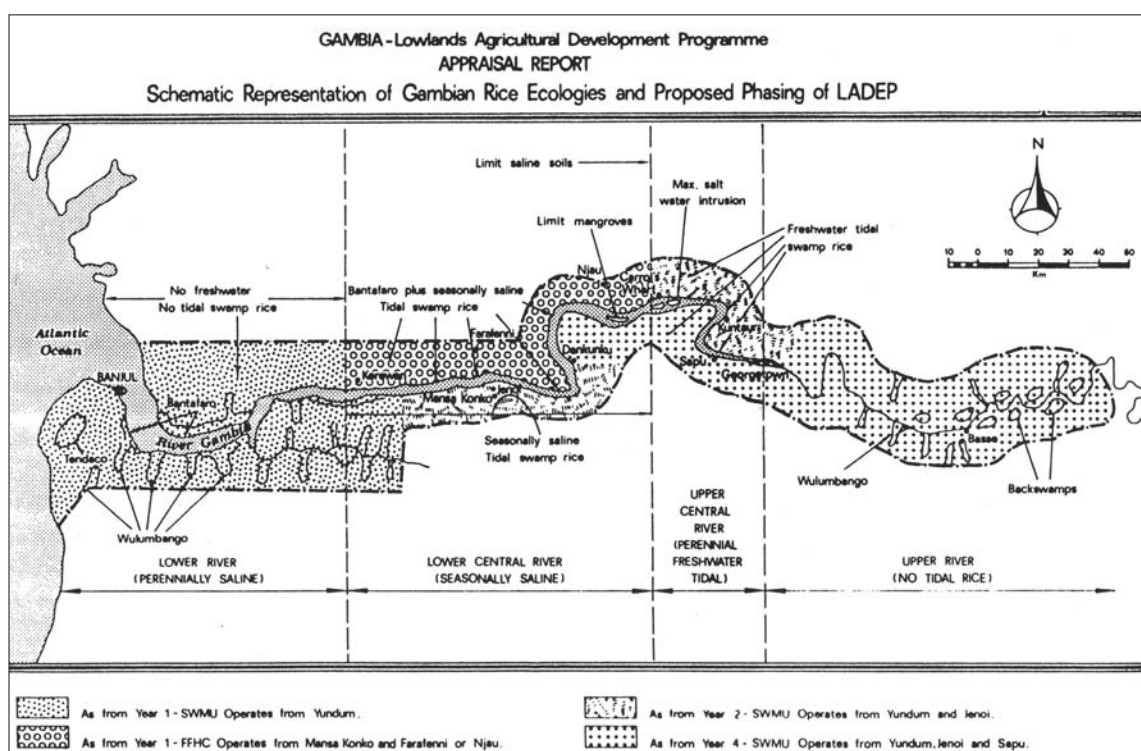
From 1997 to 2004, LADEP helped bring about fundamental changes in the traditional land tenure system. In this traditional system, land tenure is held by founder settlers. LADEP had a role as a catalyst in the devolution of individually owned land to the community, and in the redistribution and equitable sharing of new communal land among individuals, mainly women, participating in land reclamation works.

Major changes have been observed since the inception of LADEP:

- Beneficiaries are more willing to participate in reclamation works.
- The reclaimed land is now divided into equal plots and is allocated by community agreement to individual beneficiaries, irrespective of lineage.
- Women beneficiaries now have permanent ownership of land, and their children will inherit ownership of the land.
- Maintenance and cropping intensity of allocated plots have increased.
- Community cohesion has increased.

Lessons learned include the following:

- Land reforms have to be initiated by the beneficiaries and mutually agreed upon.
- Household food security can be improved if the landless are assisted in securing land permanently.
- Poverty can effectively be reduced when land is equitably distributed.



Issues involved

Decrease in area cropped for rice

Since the Sahelian drought in the mid-1970s, reduced rainfall has resulted in various forms of land degradation in the lowlands, leading farmers to abandon lowland rice fields. Problems include:

- sea water intrusion into formerly productive rice fields
- water shortage in upland valleys (part of the lowlands) and flood plains

Increase in demand for rice

Because of conflicts in the region, there had been an influx of migration into Gambia from neighbouring countries.

Lack of land availability for women

Women are Gambia's traditional rice growers. In order to grow enough rice to meet the needs of an increased population, women needed access to larger areas of tidal and swamp land than were available to them.

Traditional land tenure system restricted access to land

In Gambia, a few traditional landowners control land that is suitable for growing rice but is not easily accessible. Some land is leased out to sharecroppers, but this is not common. Seasonal sharecroppers have little incentive to improve access to and reclaim rice land, since the owner can claim it once it has been improved.

A lasting solution was sought to meet these challenges.

Scouting for ideas

During the LADEP preparatory consultations, local interest in using tidal swamps and taking advantage of their fertility was identified through SEPSS¹ methodology. However, the difficulty of physical access to the idle lands owned by traditional founder-settler families hindered their immediate cultivation. There was a need for causeways, other infrastructure and small footbridges, but traditional landowners lacked or could/would not mobilize the required labour force.

A way to resolve this stalemate – women without land but a potential labour force, landowners with land but without labour – was chosen from a range of options identified during focus group discussions.

Option 1

Use of machinery for construction of the required infrastructure, without changes in the land tenure system. Under this option, ownership of the infrastructure, an important factor for future operation and maintenance (O&M) could not be secured and it was not clear how women would enter into sharecropping/lease arrangements.

Option 2

Use of manual labour for construction of infrastructure by landowners. This option meant landowners faced the risk of labour shortages. Also, women's access was not ensured.

Option 3

Devolution of ownership of equal plots of land from traditional landowners to people participating in reclamation efforts. With the devolution of land ownership, people had a clear incentive to contribute labour to reclamation efforts and secure equal landholdings.

Choosing a development option with community users

The third option was chosen by the communities during formal community meetings (which under traditional law have legal value). The meetings were facilitated by participatory methods through LADEP/Ministry of Agriculture. The choice was then endorsed by local authorities during the design phase of LADEP (the initial eight-year phase of the 20-year intervention period).

The option had the following advantages:

- allocation of land to landless women farmers who participate (on a self-help basis) in the reclamation works
- recognition of the need for women farmers to own land if they are to invest their labour in its reclamation

The following steps supported communities in decision-making:

- Public extension services (the Department of Community Development) trained in participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods sensitized lowland communities regarding LADEP.
- The Department of Community Development collected formal requests from communities for assistance, a condition that ensured that beneficiaries would have a sense of ownership.
- A Community Mobilization Coordinator (delegated to the programme from the Department of Community Development) visited selected communities to establish site management committees as part of the village development committees established by the government, where they existed. The process involved PRA and focus group discussions on advantages and disadvantages of each option, and it supported the elaboration of community action plans.

The majority (90 per cent) of beneficiaries were women, for a total of 22,216 women from different ethnic groups.

¹ SEPSS = Socio-economic and production systems diagnostic studies (<http://www.ifad.org>).

Testing performance and impact

Background

From 1997 to 2004, LADEP cost approximately US\$8 million, and was set up in phases. The long-term development objective was the sustainable improvement of traditional rice production as a means of enhancing food security for impoverished households. The priority target group was traditional swamp and tidal land rice growers, mainly women.

Summary of changes

The Government of Gambia adopted a new constitution in 1997. The changes proposed under LADEP were designed to promote decentralization and the rational use of farmland for the common good. At present, the government is implementing a programme of local government reform and decentralization. The reforms include land reforms. The purpose of devolution of powers to local communities is to:

- involve the communities in the national socio-economic development process
- involve the communities in control mechanisms over certain activities
- empower the communities to make their own decisions on matters pertaining to their development

The programme's main innovative features are the following:

- Site management committees were set up to look into cross-cutting issues in the community that are related to rice production, particularly the provision of labour and land allocation. The committees were grouped under 35 district level farmers' associations. A legal constitution as a community-based organization was prepared for the farmers' associations and adopted in a participatory manner, before their official registration. Institutional sustainability is one of their goals, as well as an increased contribution of farmers to local decision-making processes.
- Intracommunity negotiations using the PRA method are facilitated to find solutions to common community problems. The PRA method was first introduced to extension services in charge of mobilizing communities under programme activities and was the foundation of the self-help approach adopted under LADEP.

Through these negotiations, a "land for labour" agreement was reached between the programme's beneficiaries and the founder settlers of the community. When such an agreement is made at community level, it gains legal value under traditional law.

The innovation of providing land ownership to landless rural people, mainly women, helped provide the long-term incentives required to mobilize beneficiaries to:

- provide the labour necessary to rehabilitate rice fields
- assume responsibility for infrastructure O&M after the close of the programme

The innovation brought about changes in the traditional land tenure system. In the traditional system, land tenure was held by founder settlers (who were sometimes women). LADEP brought about the devolution of individually owned land to the community, and this new common land was equitably redistributed and shared among individuals, mainly women, who participated in land reclamation works.

The changes observed since the inception of LADEP include the following:

- Beneficiaries are more willing to participate in reclamation works with the assurance of owning a portion of the land reclaimed. In the past, traditional landowners had the right to allocate land as they wished.
- The reclaimed land is now divided into equal plots and allocated by community agreement to individual beneficiaries, irrespective of lineage, which is a new process in reaching consensus.
- Women beneficiaries now permanently own land, and their children will inherit ownership of this land.
- The maintenance and cropping intensity on these new plots has increased.
- Community cohesion has increased.
- Women have benefited greatly.

Results of the first eight-year phase are positive. The innovative strategy settles the issue of land ownership in programme intervention sites. Land tenure security for poor farmers has contributed significantly to food security because of an increase in land reclamation efforts and because more land is being cropped. The programme's condition that communities must provide the labour themselves keeps a check on the amount of land they are able to reclaim and maintain.

LADEP was targeted to benefit 8,960 rice farmers in various rice growing environments in the country, on a total area of 8,075 ha of land. LADEP reached 24,684 farmers (90 per cent of them – a total of 22,216 – were women) and reclaimed a total of 7,481 ha of land.

Modifying and improving the option

During implementation, the institutional development of district level farmers' associations had not been foreseen. This involved the elaboration of a legal constitution for the associations, providing for membership fees, and their registration with the Attorney General's Chambers as community-based organizations. The farmers' associations have now been accepted as members of the National Farmers' Platform, an umbrella organization for all national farmers' associations.

The performance and impact of the programme were assessed as follows:

- Land conflicts are minimized.
- Poverty is reduced as more women farmers own land and confidently work on the land to produce crops.
- Beneficiaries are reporting increases in food production of 30 to 100 per cent. The impact assessment found that most communities report that, between upland and lowland crops, they have now achieved food security.
- Because of water retention or swamp access, the LADEP experience resulted in an additional three months per year of rice self-sufficiency.
- Food self-reliance and household food security are improving as more land is put under cultivation. The advantage of the process lies in its self-regulation: communities develop an area of a size that they can manage to reclaim and cultivate.

Lessons learned

The LADEP experience provided evidence that people-led project interventions contribute to the sustainability of change. Also, the following principles or lessons were identified:

- Land reforms have to be initiated by the beneficiaries and agreed upon by mutually binding arrangements (under traditional or other law).
- Household food security can be improved if the landless are assisted in securing land permanently.
- Poverty can effectively be reduced when rice land is equitably distributed.

Under Gambian conditions, this innovation was accepted and is ready for replication and scaling-up on a national level. The next IFAD project on lowlands development, the Participatory Integrated Watershed Management Project (PIWAMP), will build on the experiences of LADEP and scale up the approach.

The key contextual elements that should be considered as prerequisites for replication outside of Gambia are:

- **Social:** the communities, including the landowners' minority, must be prepared to negotiate favourable land allocation systems.
- **Regulatory:** land reforms under local government reforms (decentralization processes) should exist to support the innovation.
- **Institutional:** the village development committee concept, through which negotiations with site management committees can be jump-started, must be present.

Sharing the lessons learned and promoting the improved option

This innovation was promoted by LADEP through its component on community mobilization, implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture's Department of Community Development. Under this component, facilitation mechanisms were proposed to communities to support their negotiations on "land for labour" agreements. The "land for labour" agreement approach tested in the LADEP will be used again in PIWAMP, starting in 2005.

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Contacts

The Department of Community Development of the Ministry of Agriculture is the relevant public partner to contact for replication and scaling up (<http://www.statehouse.gm/cabinet2.htm>). The civil society partners to contact are the district level farmers' associations, through the National Farmers' Platform.

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